

# Did I have sex on my tantric retreat? I'll tell you later...

When self-confessed 'uptight heterosexual' *Cosmo Landesman*, 70, went looking for his mojo, he found himself way out of his comfort zone at the UK's most touchy-feely workshop. Would he shed his inhibitions (and his clothes)?

ILLUSTRATIONS: FRIEDA RUH



Ever since I turned 70 last September, I've been feeling a bit low. Not bad, just a bit... blah. I felt stuck in my daily routines and rituals. I was living all right, but not really

alive. I needed a big jolt of energy, passion, joy and love to regain my mojo. But maybe I was asking too much of life?

'Not at all,' said an old girlfriend. 'I was feeling just like you – until I did a Living Tantra course. It changed my life and it will change yours, too.'

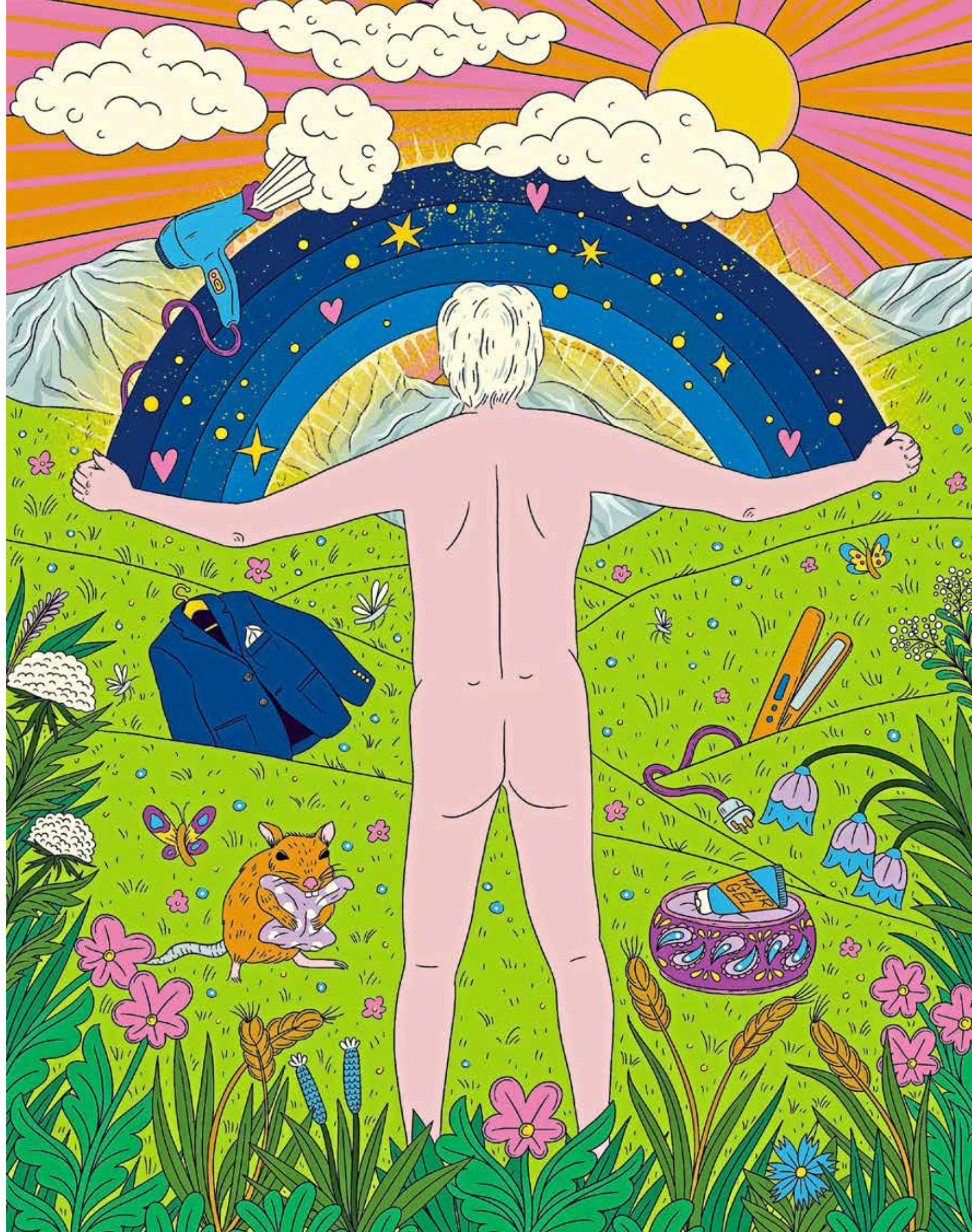
I gave her a look that said: are you insane? Me, do tantra? Have exhausting marathon sex sessions with strangers? Dance naked at dawn in dewy fields – or whatever these New-Agey nutters do? No, thanks. Not my cup of organic seaweed tea. I'm an old, white, middle-class, uptight, cynical,

smartarse journalist. I don't chant. I don't share. I don't cry. I don't hug. No, I don't do tantra – I do *tantrums*!

And guess what happened next? I chanted. I shared. I cried. I danced naked in a dewy field. I hugged strangers – women and men! But did I have lots of sex? People always ask me that. I'll tell you later.

Yes, I went to the Living Tantra 1 workshop, which took place over seven days at the EarthSpirit Centre in Somerset. It was led by Jan Day, the best known and most beloved tantra teacher in the UK. She has been teaching tantra for over 18 years and her course promises to help you live with 'presence, passion and love'. And the cost of such enlightenment? Well, including food and standard accommodation, it's £1,440.

But what is this tantra stuff? Say the T-word and most people think it's all about sex – thanks to a casual comment made years ago by the singer Sting about his seven-hour tantric sex sessions with his wife Trudie. But tantra is actually an ancient spiritual practice that originated



in India. At its core is the idea of 'weaving together all that is' – which means all that you are. The good bits and the bad bits, the dark and the light, your fears and your desires – they all provide spiritual nourishment to help make you feel more fully alive and present.

But what, I wondered, should you pack for a seven-day tantra retreat? My friend reminded me that tantra was about getting away from material possessions and personal vanity. So I kept it simple – one T-shirt, an old sarong and a pair of flip-flops. And my hair-dryer. And my hair-straightening tongs. And my hair gel, my exfoliating gel scrub and one snazzy suit – just to be on the safe side. Of course, I was hungry for spiritual connection, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't hungry for a soul mate as well.

Before I went, I imagined the course would be full of old hippies, young male incels, female nymphos and bearded perverts wearing orange robes. There were 52 of us attending and they were actually a lovely

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mix of people of all ages and from all walks of life. I met a carpenter, a bricklayer, a few therapists, teachers and lots of people in IT and tech.

OK, at first I thought they were a little weird. Usually when strangers meet like this there's a kind of distance and awkwardness between them. But I noticed on the first day of my arrival that wherever I went – the meditation hall, the garden, the communal hot tub – I found people talking and laughing and hugging as if they'd all known each other for life.

And I soon discovered that when you talk to someone there, you feel as if they are really listening to you. Not the people-pleasing you, but the authentic you. They're more interested in what you are looking for in life than what you do for a living. And one of the best things about my week in tantra world was that no one talked about Donald Trump!

Now, about the hugging thing. For the first two days all that hugging made me anxious – especially when it comes to hugging men. (I'm an uptight heterosexual →



who has always preferred a good old-fashioned handshake.) There was one man there I called the Hug Blob – a short, fat, sweaty, bearded bloke who was always going up to people and saying, ‘Can I have a hug?’ and his wishes were always granted! I must confess that seeing so many beautiful women hug the Blob gave me hug-envy. Why didn’t anyone ask me for a hug? Was I giving off an anti-hug vibe? Did I have BO?

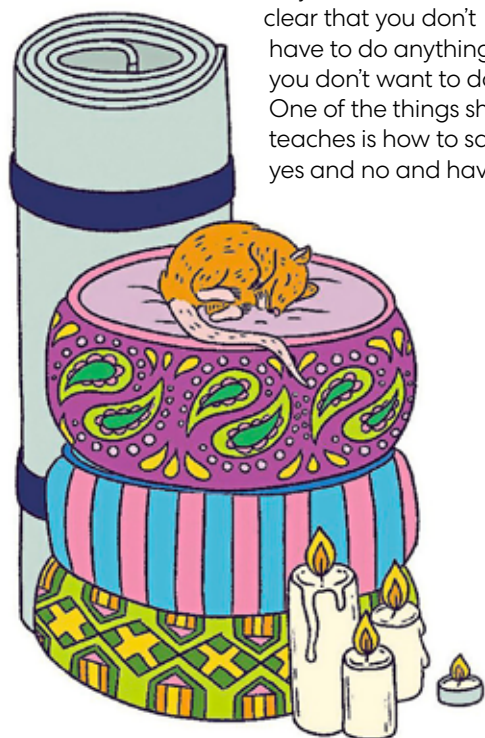
But then after lunch one afternoon I saw the Hug Blob coming my way with arms outstretched. I had two options. One: make a run for it and never come back. Two: stand my ground. Man-up and hug-up. Sure enough, he looked me in the eye and said softly, ‘Can I have a hug?’

OK, I thought, here we go. I shut my eyes and fell into his arms. He buried his head into my chest, and I held his sweaty body closer. This was my first full-on man-to-man, nipple-to-nipple hug. And it felt good! At the end of nearly five minutes of hugging he said thank you and I replied, ‘No, thank you!’

I tell this story because it shows how we are so quick to judge and dismiss other people. By the end of the week I felt ashamed that I’d called him the Hug Blob. My tantra week taught me to look deeper, and I saw beauty in men and women I would have previously quickly dismissed as unattractive or not my type.

Shedding my inhibitions about hugging a man was nothing compared to the challenge of shedding my clothes and going naked in front of over 50 people.

Jan Day made it absolutely clear that you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. One of the things she teaches is how to say yes and no and have



your boundaries respected. But I was too embarrassed by the scary sight of my bloated belly, my droopy buttocks and my latest bodily horror: my bulging hernia!

No, nudity was never going to happen for me. And then on the fifth day it did. We were having a session where we were invited to remove as much clothing as we felt comfortable with and I thought: I’m fed-up with always body-shaming myself. Off came my kit and I danced with wild abandon. And yes, bits wobbled and flapped – but I didn’t care! It was so liberating to finally have made peace with my body.

Mornings began at 8am with a meditation/dance session in a large hall lined with mattresses and pillows. Here I danced. I shook my body and rattled my chakras. I spoke gibberish and also silently contemplated the universe. At one point we did an exercise to connect with our primitive instincts. I was invited to get into an ‘inner

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animal’ and let it out. I tried to roar like a lion. I tried to grunt like a large ape. But the best I could do was get in touch with my inner gerbil and squeak as I strangled my pillow. Yes, I felt silly at first. But I came to love my morning sessions – it was a cardio workout for the soul.

Afternoons and evenings were a mix of working with small groups of four or five people or the group as a whole. Through a series of exercises and practices we learned to relate to ourselves and other people with greater intimacy. Put simply: we were learning to dump our emotional baggage, cut the bulls\*\*t and truly be ourselves.

A lot of group bonding took place over meal times. The food was vegetarian – delicious salads and vegetable curries. (Even the wholesome organic puddings were tasty.) And you could always find new people to talk with while you ate. The vibe was relaxed and friendly.

By the end of the day I was usually exhausted, emotionally and physically. So I’d head off to bed while others in the group headed off for a naked soak in



the hot tub, before hanging out most of the night. You’d think that at a tantra retreat there would, come nighttime, be mass shagging going on with the hills of Somerset alive to the sounds of orgasms. But if people were coupling and copulating, I didn’t see or hear anything – and nobody invited me to join in!

There’s no getting away from the fact that sex is a crucial part of Living Tantra. What we were trying to learn was the art of giving and receiving pleasure without the usual anxieties that accompany sex: do I look fat? Am I doing it right? Should I be doing this? The aim was cultivating deep intimacy, with your own desires and other people’s, without the crippling insecurities.

Our erotic explorations were done together as one big group in the meditation hall, but we worked in small groups of three and four, usually two men and two women. In one exercise we’d take turns in saying where and how we would like to be touched – and where we wouldn’t.

Did I want to have sex? Yes. Did I have sex? No. I have to be honest here. I found myself with two very attractive young women but felt so self-conscious about being old enough to be their dad that, when it was my turn to say what I’d like, I opted for safe areas of touch – no bottom, no genital touching, thank you very much. So the rest of me was lovingly stroked and, yes, it was very sensual but it wasn’t sexual.

And I was careful when it was my turn to stroke them to keep clear of their intimate parts even though they had granted consent. I know I was being silly, but I just didn’t want to be the dirty old man in the room. Clearly, I need to do a lot more work on my hang-ups.

And as for finding and falling in love with a tantric goddess, I had no such luck. And yet by the end of the week I did come to feel a great deal of love for the people there.

The whole experience left me feeling more fully alive, energised and with an inner calm I’ve never experienced before. The challenge now is to keep it that way.



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